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SUBJECT: KOSOVO: LOCAL ELECTIONS AN OPPORTUNITY FOR ETHNIC SERB
INTEGRATION

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SENSITIVE BUT UNCLASSIFIED - PLEASE PROTECT ACCORDINGLY

1. (SBU) SUMMARY: Kosovo Serbs will vote in municipal elections on November 15 for the first time in four of six new decentralized municipalities formed under the Ahtisaari Plan. Encouraging voter participation among Serbs in the new municipalities is critical to decentralization's success, and USAID is working with Municipal Preparation Teams (MPTs) and the GOK to launch and publicize a number of development projects that will heighten the elections' salience in the new municipalities. While Belgrade has been less vocal in its opposition to Kosovo Serb electoral participation than in the last municipal elections in 2007, we are seeing definite signs that the Government of Serbia is increasing its opposition at the local level. The registration of over 20 Kosovo Serb political entities for these elections is an encouraging sign, however. Ethnic Serb parties dominate among registrants in Gracanica/Gracanice, Klokot/Klllokot, and Ranilug/Ranillug municipalities, adding to the likelihood of Kosovo Serbs being elected in those municipalities. Ethnic Albanian parties are, however, contesting elections in force in majority-Serb Novo Brdo/Novoberde, Strpce, and the existing northern municipalities of Leposavic, Zubin Potok, and Zvecan. END SUMMARY

KOSOVO SERBS TO VOTE IN DECENTRALIZED MUNICIPALITIES

2. (SBU) Kosovo's November 15 municipal elections provide the country's Serb population with an opportunity to select the mayors and municipal assemblies that will govern their communities for the next four years. If they choose to participate, Kosovo Serbs will cast ballots in four existing Serb-majority municipalities -- Strpce/Shterpce in southern Kosovo, and Zubin Potok, Zvecan and Leposavic in northern Kosovo -- and four new Serb-majority municipalities of Gracanica/Gracanice, Klokot/Klllokot, Ranilug/Ranillug and an expanded Novo Brdo/Novoberde. The four were envisioned as part of the Ahtisaari-mandated decentralization process, which aims to empower ethnic minority communities and provide all municipalities with greater authority over the provision

of the services that most impact the day-to-day lives of their residents. Contests in the remaining two Ahtisaari-mandated municipalities, Partesh and Mitrovica North, will take place in spring 2010.

TWENTY SERB PARTIES PARTICIPATING

13. (SBU) Over 20 ethnic Serb political entities registered to participate in the November 15 elections. These include more established parties such as the Independent Liberal Party (SLS), the Serbian People's Party (SNS), and the to-date troublesome Serbian Democratic Party of Kosovo and Metohija (SDSKiM), as well as a number of smaller groups and local citizens' initiatives. In 2007, most of Kosovo's ethnic Serbs heeded calls from Belgrade to boycott Kosovo's central and municipal elections because they feared Belgrade's public threats to withdraw Serbian Government benefits and pensions from those who cast ballots. This year there are indications that Kosovo Serbs living south of the Ibar River are somewhat less inclined to take direction from Belgrade and more inclined to participate in the upcoming contest. This is, in part, due to Serbian President Tadic's decision not to issue an unequivocal call for a boycott, but to limit his public opposition to his statement that "conditions are not present" for Serb participation, and thus far, there have been no intimations from Belgrade that Serbs will lose their GOS-provided benefits for voting. Serbian parallel authorities in Kosovo have made statements discouraging voter participation that go beyond Belgrade's more restrained public line, but they have not threatened Serb voters with a loss of benefits.

BELGRADE HEDGES

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14. (SBU) Still, the Government of Serbia's attitude toward the November elections is not benign: for example, we learned on October 21 that Serbia's Ministry of Education is ordering Kosovo Serb teachers in parallel Serbian-language schools to resign from temporary employment on MPTs in Kosovo's new municipalities or face dismissal (Ref B). This follows a decision by parallel authorities and/or the Serbian Ministry of Education forbidding Serb school directors from permitting the CEC to locate polling stations in Serb schools. Serbian Assistant Minister for Kosovo Dragan Petkovic reportedly told a village gathering in Partesh on October 11 that people on Serbia's payroll should not participate in elections. These statements and actions have a chilling effect on Kosovo Serb participation in the elections. (Note: Petkovic told us on October 26 that the use of schools was not possible because they were "too closely related to the Serbian state" but that the GOS might consider allowing voting in Serbian-run community and cultural centers. He said he would not tell anyone not to vote, but restrict himself to the formula "conditions are not present for Serb participation." End Note)

ENCOURAGING SERB VOTER TURNOUT

15. (SBU) Despite efforts by Belgrade and parallel structure officials to delegitimize the elections, Kosovo Serb political parties appear to be swaying voters with arguments that electoral participation is necessary for Serbs to survive and by divorcing Kosovo's status from the discussion. SLS managed to attract close to 600 people at a recent rally in Gracanica, for example. In order to build on this apparent enthusiasm and counter the negative sotto voce messages coming from Belgrade and parallel structures, we are supporting get-out-the-vote campaigns organized by the CEC and local Kosovo Serb NGOs south of the Ibar. In the coming weeks, we will also dedicate a number of U.S.-funded projects tied to the MPTs in each of the new municipalities, such as roads, parks and playgrounds, water systems, trash bins and solid waste collection, that underscore the benefits of decentralization. We are also working with MPTs to help them establish their basic frameworks, such as municipal statutes and organizational charts. The aim is to make the decentralization process more tangible to local Serbs,

underscore its benefits, and highlight the importance of voting on November 15.

PARTY POLITICS IN RANILUG, GRACANICA, AND KLOKOT

¶6. (SBU) In Serb-dominated Ranilug/Ranillug only ethnic-Serb political entities are running in November. In southern Kosovo's Serb "capital" Gracanica/Gracanice, only one ethnic Albanian party, the Democratic League of Dardania (LDD), registered mayoral and assembly candidates. This bolsters the likelihood that these now high-profile areas will have democratically-elected ethnic Serb leadership, which is critical to securing popular confidence in local representation as well as building decentralization's credibility within Kosovo's Serb community. Turnout will be crucial to ensuring the Serb leadership in these two municipalities enjoys the legitimacy required to govern effectively. In Klokot/Klllokot, where Serbs comprise about 75 percent of the population, only the Kosovo Serb SLS and the Kosovo Albanian Democratic League of Kosovo (LDK) registered, and only the SLS submitted a candidate for mayor. This all but ensures ethnic-Serb leadership in this municipality, as well. We have heard reports that the SLS and LDK have made a gentleman's agreement to involve each other in power sharing.

NOVO BRDO AND STRPCE: SERBS MUST VOTE

¶7. (SBU) Both ethnic Albanian and ethnic Serb political entities are running for the mayoral offices and assembly seats in the expanded Novo Brdo/Novoberde and the existing Strpce municipalities. In each case, the outcome will depend on voter turnout among Serbs. In 2007 Prime Minister Thaci's Democratic Party of Kosovo (PDK) won a

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majority in the Strpce Assembly due to low ethnic Serb turnout. PDK also won a majority of the Assembly seats in Novo Brdo for the same reason, and LDK won the mayor's race there. In 2007 UNMIK's SRSG took remedial action to ensure that Serbs had "appropriate representation" in elected municipal structures by voiding the results and reappointing previously-elected Serb representatives to the mayor's office and municipal assembly in Strpce and reappointing the previous municipal assembly in Novo Brdo/Novoberde. If Serbs refuse to vote in November in these municipalities, Albanian parties will take the mayors' offices and a majority of the seats in the municipal assemblies. There is no mechanism for changing this outcome, and Prime Minister Thaci and other GOK leaders have stated on numerous occasions that they want to see electoral outcomes respected in November.

ENSURING VOTING OPPORTUNITY IN THE NORTH

¶8. (SBU) We expect that only a handful of Kosovo Serbs will participate in November elections in the northern ethnic-Serb dominated municipalities of Kosovo, where the populations are politically and geographically closer to Belgrade. Despite this, we are working with the CEC to ensure that those willing to vote -- both ethnic Serbs and the small ethnic Albanian minority -- will have the opportunity to cast ballots. We have funded a CEC plan to provide mobile polling stations for Serb voters in the northern municipalities (Note: Serbs in the north voted in mobile polling stations in 2007 as well. The CEC will staff static polling stations for Albanians in the northern enclave Albanian villages. End Note) With few exceptions, ethnic Albanian parties dominate party registrations in Leposavic, Zubin Potok, and Zvecan. SDSKiM is registered for both the mayoral and assembly races in Zvecan and Zubin Potok. As a reference point, zero votes were cast for Serb parties in Zubin Potok and Zvecan in 2007, and four Serb parties received one vote each in Leposavic in 2007. Absent a call from Belgrade for Serbs to participate in the November elections, we anticipate similar low rates of turnout there this year.

COMMENT

¶9. (SBU) Supporting Kosovo's institutions in their efforts to

encourage ethnic Serb voter participation remains an uphill battle, but we are marshalling our resources -- and encouraging the GOK to do the same with its own -- to underscore to Kosovo Serbs that these elections count. We are planning frequent events to highlight the benefits of decentralization to Kosovo Serbs, and we are showing Kosovo Serbs that the USG supports Kosovo's minority communities. Our European friends are also engaged, but they could be much more active in the process. Ethnic Albanian parties will most likely win in the majority-Serb municipalities in the north due to low voter turnout by Kosovo Serbs there. Nonetheless, increased Serb voter turnout overall and tangible progress on decentralization could produce outcomes south of the Ibar that advance our long-term goal of integrating Kosovo's Serbs into a stable, democratic Kosovo. Despite our best efforts, however, statements and actions by Belgrade and the parallel structures between now and election day have the potential to undermine our efforts.

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